

# The Prince and the Troublesome Maiden

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Ever wonder how Shikamaru's parents got together?

Status: complete

Published: 2007-08-10

Words: 10535

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Humor -  
Characters: Shikaku N., Yoshino N. - Reviews: 116 - Favs: 390 - Follows:  
63

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3713999/1/The-Prince-and-the-Troublesome-Maiden>

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# The Prince and the Troublesome Maiden

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**Author's Note:** For any of you who are currently reading my story **Invitation** sorry, but this is not a new story it is a chapter in that much longer one. For any of you who are not reading it, if you enjoy this story you may want to give it a try. Please enjoy!

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They were in the garden, the remains of another delicious meal were packed into the basket and they were relaxing beneath the palm leaves. Temari had her eyes closed and her head lying in his lap. There were no plans for the rest of the day. They would find something to do, or not but they knew they would spend the rest of the day together. That was enough.

Temari opened a single eye and looked up at him. "Hey lazy, tell me a story."

He looked down at her curiously. "I don't know any."

She poked him in the ribs. "Baka, everyone knows some stories. Now tell me one, I want you to entertain me."

He smirked at her. "Fine I'll tell you one."

She closed her eye and grinned smugly. "I want it to be romantic, you know with a prince and a fair maiden, that kind of story."

"A prince and a fair maiden huh?" He grinned. "You know I think I do have a story for you. You see the story begins..."

"Once upon a time," she interrupted. "All these kinds of stories begin with, 'once upon a time.'"

He rolled his eyes even though she couldn't see it. "Troublesome woman, fine, once upon a time in a land far from here called Konoha there lived a handsome prince by the name of Nara Shikaku..."

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18 years ago, before the Kyuubi's attack, before the choosing of the Yondaime, in the second year of a bitter war between Iwagakure and Konohagakure.

"You are such a liar!" Choza called him out.

"Geez what a filthy imagination! You should write some of those dirty books. You know the ones Jiraiya is always reading." Inoichi added.

"Hey! Why are you guys being so troublesome? I swear it's true!"

"Liar!" They both shouted at him.

"But it's true! Her sister really did walk in on us and she said..."

"What a powerful sword!" Choza mimicked a girl's shriek. The three of them burst into laughter.

Shikaku spotted something and suddenly straightened up in his chair. "Uh oh, I think I've just acquired a new target!"

His two friends both looked in the direction he was staring. "Oh no!" Choza groaned.

"Her *again* ? Shikaku don't you suffer enough from the Rock nins?" Inoichi put in.

He stood up a bit shakily. "Hey she is the hottest girl in here and no woman can resist the Nara charm forever." He left the table and headed for the bar. "Wish me luck! I am going to engage the enemy!"

Both his friends cheered him on until he was out of hearing. "50 ryu says she punches him again." Choza said.

Inoichi thought for a moment, but shook his head. "No bet."

The music was loud and different colored lights were flashing on and off in time with it. The dance floor was packed as was the bar. The

Red Lantern was the most popular club in Konoha and the best place to meet beautiful and available young women. Tonight was no exception. Shikakau had locked on to one very lucky lady.

"So what is it like to be the most beautiful woman in all of Konoha?" He slid up beside his intended target.

The woman gave him an exasperated look and shook her head. "I wouldn't know. Why don't you try asking me what it's like to be the most hounded? I told you last time and the time before that and the time before that I'm not interested."

He looked hurt. "You know all I want is to buy you one drink."

"I've got my own money thanks."

"Well could you at least tell me your name this time?"

"No that would just encourage you."

"Well how about your phone number then?" He gave her a winning smile.

The look she sent him could have frozen fire. "I won't even tell you my name. *Why* would I give you my number?"

"You know I'm just trying to be friendly. Most women would appreciate the attention."

"Go bother one of them then."

He gave her a considering look. "Say, you're not a lesbian are you? If you are there's a club just..."

The next thing he knew he was waking up on the floor with his two teammates kneeling over him.

"What happened?" His jaw hurt like hell.

"The Queen Bitch hit you again. Now come on lets get you to the hospital so you can get healed up... again." Inoichi said.

As his friends helped him up he yelped in pain. "My ribs! What the hell? It feels like they're broken."

"Wouldn't surprise me. After she punched you she spent about five minutes kicking you." Choza said.

He shot his two friends a betrayed look. "And you two just watched? Some friends you are."

"We didn't sign up for a suicide mission." Inoichi said flatly.

"Come on lets get you to the hospital." Choza carefully put his friend on his back. "What did you say to her anyway?"

Shikaku grinned. "I asked her if she was a lesbian."

"Yes that would do it." Choza nodded.

"From her reaction I'm guessing she's not." Inoichi said.

"So are you finally ready to give up on the Queen Bitch?" Choza asked.

Even though it hurt Shikaku laughed. "Hell no!"

Inoichi shook his head. "You really do have a death wish don't you?"

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"Why are we coming here? I don't even like sea food. Man what a drag." Shikaku whined.

"It's my turn to pick where we eat and I do." Inoichi replied.

"The food is supposed to be pretty good." Choza tried to play peacemaker. "They serve sake and beer."

"Well then it can't be too bad." Shikaku said.

They entered the new restaurant's ornate doors and were greeted by a short fellow with salt and pepper hair wearing a truly ugly yellow uniform. "Welcome gentleman! The Hotono Fish Palace is honored to serve three of its heroic shinobi warriors! Would you gentlemen prefer a booth or table?"

"We always get a booth in the back." Inoichi informed him.

The man nodded happily and led the way. Taking a look around it seemed a nice enough place. They had only been open a couple of months and were still trying to establish themselves. It looked to only be about half full despite it being near dinner time. They were seated at a booth and the man informed them their waitress would be there shortly.

The three of them were looking at menus and trying to decide whether to start off with a round of sake or beer first.

Their waitress came over; she had on the same distinctive yellow uniform. "Can I start you off with some appetizers gentlemen?"

Shikaku looked up from the menu. "No but we'll get..." He took one look at the pretty waitress and his jaw dropped. "You!"

When she his face she gave him a look of pure fury. "You! What are you doing here did you follow me you stalker?!"

"Hey! Me and my friends just came here to eat!"

"Well listen you jerk don't think..."

**" Yoshino! "**

The girl jumped about two feet into the air. When she landed she turned around to face the same man who had seated them. "What are you doing yelling at customers?"

"Father I just..."

He looked up at her and stuck a finger half an inch from her nose and began shaking it. "Don't think just because you are 19 you are too old to go over my knee daughter."

Shikaku enjoyed the sight of seeing her seem to shrink before his very eyes. She nodded meekly. "Yes father."

The man then turned to the three of them and put on a happy smile. "Please forgive my daughter she has always been disrespectful and rude." He turned back to her. "Do not yell at the customers again Yoshino. What do I always say?"

"Happy customers are life, unhappy customers are death." She repeated the mantra.

"Best remember that." The man gave the three of them a bow and left to greet some new arrivals.

When she turned back towards them the smile on Shikaku's face gave her a very bad feeling. She tried sending them a happy smile. "I apologize for my rude behavior."

Shikaku lifted an eyebrow. "Do you mean here or at the club?"

He could see the smile crack, but the woman held onto it somehow. "I mean here as I am *serving* you." She seemed to struggle a bit with the word. "Are you ready to order?"

Choza was about to say something but Shikaku gave him no chance. "Actually I am not sure would you mind terribly reading out the *entire* menu to us?"

"You're joking."

"Well if it's too much trouble I could always ask your dad if we could get a different waitress. One who is less rude and disrespectful to the customers."



She sent him a look of pure hatred, but her tone was mild. "I would be *happy* to read the menu out to you."

Choza sent Inoichi a discontented glance. "You picked this place."

"How was I supposed to know the Queen Bitch worked here?"

"What did you call me?" Inoichi shrank back from the woman as he felt a wave of killer intent roll off her.

"He called you, 'Queen Bitch.'" Shikaku replied helpfully stressing the two syllables. "But we had to call you something since we didn't know your name, *Yoshino*. Now I would appreciate it if you would get back to reading out the menu for us."

At the end of the evening Shikaku left a generous tip on the table as he got up to follow his friends. "Well *Yoshino* that was a wonderful meal. I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

She sent him a smirk. "I only get one night off a week and it's not tomorrow, I'll be working not going to the club."

He smiled. "I know."

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"Well that was another great meal; please send my compliments to the chief." He dumped more than enough ryo notes on the table and stood up to leave.

She got in his way and whispered to him. "All right you've been here four nights in a row I want you to leave me alone."

He gave her a smug look. "Can I help it if the food and service are so wonderful here?"

"You don't like the food that much." She stated flatly.

"Must be the service then."

"What is it going to take for you to stop coming here?"

"Have one drink with me."

She looked like she had swallowed and overripe lemon, but after a moment she finally nodded. "I get off at ten; I'll meet you at Noslen's bar down the street."

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She met him at the bar. They each got a beer. When she got hers she put it to her lips and chugged it down in about ten seconds.

She slammed the bottle back down on the bar and stood up. "All right I had a drink with you, good bye."

"Bye, I'll see you tomorrow I'm thinking of trying the snapper."

She sat back down again. "Look why won't you just leave me alone, you are never getting what you want!"

"What do you mean?" He sipped his own beer.

"No matter how much you annoy me or piss me off at work I am *never* going to sleep with you."

He looked just shocked. "Oh *Yoshino* ! How could you think so poorly of me?"

She looked to the bartender and asked for another beer. "Well *Shikaku* it's probably because you've been trying to get me into bed since we met."

"A gentleman would never proposition a lady. All I've been trying to do this whole time is get you to know me."

"That's all, huh?" She answered sarcastically.

He nodded. "Now if after you get to know me you should *want* to sleep with me..."

"You know if I were to murder you right now no court would convict me."

He shrugged. "Well if it helps any my squad is going back to the front next week. We're pulling another 60 day rotation. Maybe if you get lucky some Rock nin will bury me and you'll be saved."

She gave him a sharp look. "Don't joke about that, too many people have already died in this war for that to be funny. I don't want you to die I just want you to leave me alone."

He nodded to her beer. "Drink that and I'm sure you'll start to feel better."

"The only thing that would help would be forgetting you completely."

"Well enough alcohol can do even that."

She shook her head. "I have a high tolerance for alcohol. It's a high tolerance for annoying men I lack."

He shrugged. "I'm sure it's pretty high for a woman." He took a pull at his beer.

She sent him a look. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"What? I was complimenting you. I'm sure that for a woman you can put it away."

"Listen jerk I am the hardest drinker in my family."

"Doesn't say too much about your family then does it?"

Her eyes turned to slits. "I bet I could drink you under the table." He just laughed. "You afraid?"

He stopped laughing and looked at her. "You're serious."

"Damn right."

He thought about it for a bit. "All right, but if I win you have to go out on a date with me on your next day off."

"Fine, and if I win you promise never to set foot in the restaurant ever again."

"Don't you want me to promise to stay out of the Red Lantern too?"

"No, I like putting you in your place when you're being an ass."

He shook his head. "Woman there is no way you can out drink me. In fact not only will I stay away from the restaurant, if you out drink me you can have this." From beneath his shirt he pulled out a pendant.

She looked closely at it. She'd never seen anything quite like it. On the end of a slim chain was a ball of polished reddish brown onyx wrapped by three bands of silver. On the central band she could see an engraved name, *Shikaku*.

"Are you sure you want to bet that? I don't own any expensive pieces of jewelry and that looks nice."

"It has a sale value of about 2,000 ryu."

She believed him. "You sure you want to risk it?"

"It's not a risk." He said blandly.

She shrugged her shoulders and turned to the bartender. "Can I get a couple bottles of 100 proof vodka and two shot glasses please?"

"Vodka?" He said a bit surprised.

"Beer would take too long and I have work tomorrow."

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He woke up with his head splitting open. His tongue had become sand paper and he had the yummy after taste of vomit. Another

great night out with the boys. As he slowly, very slowly, lifted his head he could see he was still in his clothes and sprawled out on his couch. He got to his feet and wandered over to the bathroom. He didn't remember much, but that wasn't exactly unusual. He got the half empty aspirin bottle out of the cabinet and dumped nine or ten into his mouth. He cupped his hands beneath the faucet and gulped down enough water to get them swallowed. Now a hot shower and then some tea. As he got undresses he noticed something was missing. Damn it! Where the hell had he put it? He stumbled back out to the sofa and began checking beneath it then between the cushions and all around it.

"Troublesome," he muttered to himself. He was sure it was just lost somewhere in the house but he didn't like not knowing where it was. He put his hands together and performed three seals. " **Shadow Lost Lamb Technique: Shikaku.** " Immediately his shadow stretched out about ten feet going out underneath his front door. What the hell? "Did I lose it in the club?" He *never* lost it, not even during battle. What had happened last night where had the three of them gone? He tried to remember. Oh wait! He hadn't been with the boys. That's right he had finally gotten her to have that drink with him. Then she had suggested that ridiculous challenge. And he had accepted saying if she won not only would he stay out of the restaurant but he would give her...

He suddenly stiffened. No! That was not possible! Nara Shikano's boy losing to a *girl* in a drinking contest? For the first time in his life he was glad his dad was not alive to see this. "Geez if the guys find out they'll never let me live it down." There was also the little matter of getting it back. He shook his head still not believing it. Well he knew what he had to do. The living room clock said it was almost eleven. He'd found out she worked a shift from 1:30 to 10:00 and she'd said she was working today. He would have time to get what he needed and see her. He stumbled back to the bathroom. It was shaping up to be a lousy day.

Somehow she was not surprised to see him standing outside her work. He definitely looked the worse for wear. Laughing to herself she added a spring to her step and approached him. "Well hello Shikaku!" She deliberately said in a loud voice. By the way he cringed he was obviously still hung over. Served the jerk right. "You're not going back on your word are you? You kept telling me what a gentleman you are and how a gentleman would never break his word, especially to a lady."

He shook his head and gave her a baleful look. "Woman I said I wouldn't step foot in the restaurant and as you can see I am outside of it."

"Good to know you're such an upstanding fellow. Now if you'll excuse me I have to get to work."

He stepped between her and the door. "Look woman I just came here to get my heart back I know you have it."

She stared at him, and burst out laughing. "That's pitiful, that has got to be your worst line yet! What are you going to do start telling me about how I've stolen your heart?"

He glared at her. "No, you didn't steal it you just won it somehow and I want it back." She looked completely confused. He let out an exasperated breath. "The pendant from last night, it's special and I want to get it back."

She smiled suddenly understanding. "Oh, you mean this." She pulled it out from underneath her dress. "Why do you call it a heart when it's a sphere?"

He shut his eyes and ground out an explanation. "It's not just a piece of jewelry. It's a very special and precious item that's unique to my clan; we call it a Nara's Heart. Each one is made and commissioned for a specific person and has special locator jutsus placed on it. Any member of the Nara clan can locate it with a simple jutsu so the wearer will never be lost. What you're holding there is *my* heart

which was given to me by my father just after I was born. It's very precious to me and I've come to get it back."

She looked impressed. "Well if it's so precious you shouldn't have bet it." She quickly hid it beneath her dress again. "I don't have any really nice things and I happen to think it's beautiful. I'm keeping it. I won it fairly and you can't just take it back."

"I know woman, that's why I brought this with me." He held out a manila envelope to her.

"What's that?"

"I stopped by the bank before I came here, it's 5,000 ryu that's more than double what you could get for it."

She didn't reach for it and simply shook her head. "No, I'd rather just keep it."

He stared at her. "What? Why? Take the money and you can buy all the shiny baubles you want. It's just a trinket to you but to me it's very precious." He was starting to get angry.

She glared at him starting to feel her own temper rise. "It's precious to me too you ass. It happens to be the first really nice piece I've ever gotten and I *earned* it on my own without anyone's help. I happen to really like it and I'm keeping it."

"Look I'll make it 10,000."

"Please excuse me I'm going to be late for work."

As she tried to get past him he had to jump about to stay between her and the door. The customers who were walking in and out of the restaurant were staring at the odd couple. "Look I am *not* leaving here without my heart! Just name your price. I'll stay away from you and never speak to you again, hell I'll run in the other direction if I see you, just tell me what you want."

She stopped trying to get past him. "What I want is for you to let me get to work! Look if you've got so much damn money why don't you just have a new one made?"

"It wouldn't be the same. My *father* gave this to me and he's been dead four years now."

That caught her off guard. "Really?" He nodded. Damn it. If it really was a reminder to him of his father then it wouldn't be right to keep it. It was a shame, she really did like it, and she had wanted to teach this ass a lesson for underestimating her. But as much of a jerk as he had been he really hadn't done anything *that* bad to her. She would just have to be satisfied with costing him a wad of cash and wounding his stupid male pride. It was just too bad she couldn't do a bit more to him.

As fate would have it her father stuck his head out the door at that moment. "Yoshino! Stop flirting with your boyfriend and get in here!"

"He is not..."

"Ramaki quit so I need you to take over for him."

"What? Oh come on dad I hate doing that job and I won't make any tips!"

Her father looked anything but sympathetic. "You know the rules and you're the youngest." He went back inside.

"Damn it!" She looked at Shikaku and was about to start railing at him when she suddenly had a brilliant idea.

Shikaku took a look at her face and abruptly felt a cold dread like when he was point on a recon mission. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You would do anything to get this back right?"



"Damn near." He answered warily. She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the restaurant. "Hey!"

Her father looked at the two of them as they came in. Before he could ask she spoke up.

"Father I have great news! Shikaku here has agreed to be our new fish boy."

"What?! Woman what the hell are you talking about?"

She turned to him and crossed her arms looking self-righteous. "Well do you want this back or not? I won't sell it to you and if you try and take it from me I'll scream bloody murder. But if you'll agree to work here as fish boy for six months I'll give it back to you."

He stared at her his mouth open. "Woman are you insane? Do you see this?" He tapped the green vest he had on over his fishnet shirt. "I am a Chunin of Konoha and beyond that I am head of the Nara clan and you expect me to be a *fish boy*?"

"Do want your, 'heart,' back or not?"

"Just take the damn money."

"What money?" Her father asked but was ignored.

"I don't want it; I prefer to earn what I get. Now like I said if you'll agree to work here for six months I'll give it back to you."

"I am an active duty combat shinobi and my platoon is going back to the front in two days. Do you expect me to tell the Hokage I can't go because I have to work in a restaurant?"

"I've talked to shinobi before; you're 60 days on and 60 days off right?" He nodded. "Fine, when you're in Konoha you work here that's all. You can work the same shift I do, six days a week from 1:30 to 10:00. When you've worked the equivalent of six months I'll give you your heart back."

"His heart?" Her father questioned.

"That'll take a year."

She smiled. "Only if you start immediately." She saw her father about to say something. "And you work for free of course." Her father lit up.

"Of course," he said dully. This could not be real it had to be some sort of nightmare. "Please tell me you're joking with me and you'll let me buy it back from you."

She headed towards the back of the restaurant. "Come on I'll get you an apron and a hair net. Are you good with knives?"

"Deadly."

She smiled at him. "Good."

In short order he found himself seated at a small table in the back of the kitchen surrounded by five huge baskets stuffed with dead fish and ice. He had on a hair net and a dirty semi-white apron. His Chunin vest was hanging in an adjacent room in a rusty locker. Shikaku took out one of the fish and stared at it.

"You know I could have avoided all this." He said to the fish. "I could have just gone for the blonde who was smiling at me. But no, I have to like brunettes." The fish was wise enough to not say anything."

"Hey fish boy stop talking to your friend and get to work. Start gutting and chopping off heads." Yoshino smirked.

He looked from the fish to the cause of this situation. "I am very eager to begin decapitating and gutting. But what do you want me to do with the damn fish?" She laughed at him and walked out of the kitchen. He looked back to the fish still in his hand. "From now on I swear blondes and red heads only!" He looked at the rather dull kitchen knife and set it aside. From a belt pouch he removed one of his razor sharp kunai. "Sorry about this, I really would rather be

doing this to someone else." He brought the knife down and began his work.

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At the end of the night the two of them exited the restaurant together with a few other employees.

"How did you like your first day on the job?" She asked him.

He sent her a surly look. "I never thought I'd say this but I actually think I'm looking forward to getting back to the war."

She shrugged. "Just 179 more days to go."

"Why are you doing this? Why won't you just accept my money?"

She looked at him. "Tell me something. Am I making your life miserable for no other reason than that I can?"

"Yes."

"That's why." With that she turned around and headed home. "See you tomorrow fish boy."

---

"Where have you been lately?" Choza asked.

"I've been busy." Shikaku answered looking around the club nervously.

"Busy with some new girl I'll bet." Inoichi complained. "Is she so amazing you forget about your friends? We've barely seen you for the last week."

"Don't be so troublesome, we're going to be together for the next 2 months."

"Yes because we are combat squad ten. But when we are home we get together because we are *friends*. You shouldn't let any woman

come between you and your friends." Inoichi pointed out.

"Guys I swear it's not like that." Shikaku continued to stare about nervously.

"What is wrong with you?" Choza asked. "You look like you are waiting to be ambushed."

"I'm just looking out for someone."

"Who?" Choza inquired.

"I'll bet he's worried about his new lady." Inoichi said.

"Guys why don't we go somewhere else?" Shikaku pleaded.

"We always come here the night before we leave its tradition." Choza said.

"Don't go screwing with tradition." Inoichi said.

That was when he saw her. "Ah damn it!" He tried to duck and hide behind Choza.

"What are you doing?" Choza asked.

"I don't want her to see me." Shikaku said.

"Who are you talking about?" Choza said.

Inoichi however had seen where he was looking. "You're dating the Queen Bitch! Shikaku you sly bastard you finally wore her down!"

"No, it's not like that. Come on guys lets sneak out of here before she notices me."

"I think it's too late for that, she's coming over." Inoichi said.

She approached their table with a huge smile and a low cut black dress. "Well hello fish boy." Without asking she sat down at their table.

"Shikaku is she wearing your pendant?" Choza asked.

"Fish boy?" Inoichi looked at his friend.

"Oh did he not tell you about losing this to me after I beat him in a drinking contest?" She asked playfully. "Or about the fact he is working in my family's restaurant as our fish boy so he can get it back? Here I brought some pictures." She helpfully handed them some photos.

As his two friends studied them he sent the woman a murderous look.

---

"Do you miss him?" Suska asked her little sister as they put on their uniforms in the small locker room.

"Are you crazy?" Yoshino stared at her. "He's a jerk, I hate him."

She sent her a knowing look. "So is that why you made sure you'd see him for a whole year?"

"I wanted to teach him a lesson about underestimating women."

"You sure? I've noticed you seem to spend an *awful* lot of time in the kitchen when he's here."

"I hate him! That's why I went over to where he and his friends were last night and spent an hour telling them about how I outsmarted him." Her sister just gave her an amused look. "What?"

"You went to the trouble of spending an hour with him outside of work? Yeah it really sounds like you can't stand the guy."

"It's not like we were on a date! In fact he told me he was going to, 'get even,' with me when he gets back."

"Sure, listen Yoshino do me one favor."

"What?" She asked suspiciously.

"Make me Maid of Honor at your wedding."

"Baka!"

---

He was smiling at her as he stepped out of the men's dressing room.  
"Welcome back fish boy."

"Thanks so good to be back. By the way don't think I've forgotten I owe you for embarrassing me in front of my friends."

"What are you going to do?" She asked smugly.

He smiled more. "Let's just say it's not wise to piss off a shinobi, especially not one with my level of stealth skills."

"I'm quaking in terror." She said as she ducked into the women's dressing room and he headed towards the kitchen.

An hour into her shift she was sure something was wrong. People kept laughing and giggling around her. But when she asked no one would tell her why. Even more disturbing than the general laughter and looks there was a middle aged blonde woman who seemed to be *flirting* with her.

" **Yoshino!** " Her father yelled at her.

"What?"

"What is on the back of your uniform?"

She tried looking and sure enough there seemed to be writing in black letters. What the hell? It had been perfectly clean when she put it on. She couldn't make out what it said and so headed to the ladies restroom. When she got there she was able to look at her back in the mirror. There the words, *I kiss girls*, could be clearly seen.

Shikaku was not surprised when he felt the killer intent as she stormed into the kitchen. He looked into her red face and asked mildly. "Something wrong Yoshino?"

"You bastard! You humiliate me in front of my whole family?"

"Well if you would just have the courage to come out and admit the truth you wouldn't need my help."

**" I am not a lesbian! "**

He shook his head. "More denial it's not healthy for you. I talked to your sister why haven't you ever dated anyone for more than two weeks?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but every guy I meet is just like you interested in just one thing."

"So you decided to switch teams?"

Her fists clenched and she shook, wanting to reach out and choke the life out of him. "I am *not* a lesbian."

"Your sister thinks you might be."

"She does not!"

Suska stuck her head into the kitchen. "Actually I do but it's all right sis, I love you no matter what lifestyle you choose." She ducked back out of the kitchen.

Yoshino stared at the man. "I am going to make you regret this."

"To quote a troublesome woman, 'I am quaking in terror.'"

She stormed out of the kitchen to change her uniform.

"You sure you're not a lesbian?"

"Ask me again after I've had to deal with you a couple more months!"

---

The following day he was on his half hour lunch break and having his usual roast beef sandwich. He still didn't like fish all that much so he had gotten into the habit of packing his own lunch. He had eaten about half of it when he suspected something might be wrong. He felt a sour ache in his belly and the impulse to start gagging. Before he could even get up he was vomiting on the floor. He was on his hands and knees trying to stop retching. Five minutes later, when his stomach was mercifully empty he noticed a presence standing a few feet away. He saw her put down a small bottle of ipecac.

"You know you're going to have to clean that up."

"You..."

"The mop and bucket are over there." She pointed helpfully.

---

The day after that Suska was still shocked. "I can't believe you did that."

"I think he finally knows better than to mess with me now." They were at their lockers getting ready for a new day.

"Aren't you worried he's going to do something to get back at you?"

"He wouldn't dare." She opened her locker and was promptly buried under an avalanche of about 50 fish heads. Yoshino just stood there, too shocked to even start yelling. Her uniform and her *new dress* were drenched in fish juice.



Suska gaped. "Yeah, he wouldn't dare all right."

She stormed into the kitchen and grabbed a butcher's knife. "**Shikaku!**"

"Something wrong *Yoshino* ?" That was all he got out before she began chasing him around the kitchen with her knife.

---

That evening she waited for him outside the restaurant.

"I am sorry I stabbed you."

He shrugged. "It's just a flesh wound I've had worse."

"I smelled of raw fish all day."

"I smell that way every day."

"Yeah, but you're not trying to get tips. You do know I am going to have to get back at you now?"

"Of course, and then I'll have to retaliate."

"Of course," she began to leave.

"Do you always walk home alone?"

"Usually."

"May I walk you home?"

"No." She began to walk away. She had gotten half a dozen steps before he was at her side. She came to an immediate halt. "I told you I don't want you to walk me home."

"A gentleman does not allow a lady to go home alone."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know, my ribs *still* ache some times."

She couldn't help it, she grinned a little. When he wasn't acting like an ass he *could* be kind of funny. She shrugged her shoulders and started walking again. "Fine I don't really care." He fell into step beside her and they walked together in silence.

They walked for about twenty minutes before coming to an abrupt stop outside a slightly run down brick apartment building.

"This is me." She said and turned to face him, ready to shoot down yet another lame come on.

He nodded. "Good night Yoshino." He simply turned around and headed back the way they'd come.

"That's it?" She said in surprise, bringing him up short. "You're not going to try and convince me to invite you up?"

"No I'm not. I'm very tired and I've had enough grief and aggravation for one night." With that he leaped up onto the side of the building and then onto the roof. He jumped across roof tops and was quickly gone from sight.

Yoshino stood out in the warm summer night feeling an odd mix of emotions. She was mostly surprised, partly relieved, and a very small part of her was... disappointed. She shook her head and hurried into her building, she needed a long hot shower to get rid of the smell of fish.

---

"Do you suppose he's all right?" Yoshino asked.

Suska looked at her younger sister as they wiped the tables down and put the chairs up. She didn't need to ask which *he* she was talking about. "I honestly don't know. I hope so."

"The news from the front is very bad, so much fighting so much killing; I hope he's all right." Suska sent her a knowing smile. "Don't start with me, he's a jerk but I don't want him or anyone else to be killed. There's nothing wrong with that." She said defensively.

"I didn't say there was. You know if you want we can go over to the temple and make an offering for his safe return."

"Do you actually think that helps?"

"Well it certainly can't hurt and it's *something* ."

Yoshino thought about it. "All right lets do that."

---

He had returned to the restaurant four days later than expected. She had begun going out of her mind with worry. She had actually checked the casualty lists in the papers searching for his name. When he walked into the restaurant he was in a gruff mood. There were two bandages across his face.

"Shikaku are you all right?" When she saw him she ran up to him and wrapped her arms around him giving him a hug.

He looked at her in surprise, as did Suska and her father. "I am fine Yoshino." He looked down at her face and was taken back to see her eyes were wet.

She nodded and let go of him, quickly rubbing her eyes. "What happened? Your face?" She reached out and gently touched his cheek.

His face suddenly felt hot under her touch. He gave her a reassuring grin. "Oh these are nothing; a Rock nin was nice enough to give me some beauty marks that's all."

"But you're all right?" He nodded. "Your friends too?"

He suddenly looked hurt. "Choza and Inoichi are both fine, though things were kind of hairy for awhile. But not all my friends were so lucky. Now I need to get to the kitchen."

"Shikaku if you'd like you could take a few days..."

He gave her a grin. "Woman a man always does what he has to. Besides I would like to be busy." She just nodded and he headed to the back.

He was at his usual work station chopping and cutting. She could sense he was not in a good mood. His usual little smart ass grin was missing and he seemed very withdrawn. Normally he would make small talk with the staff and with Suska, but today he was keeping to himself. She wasn't sure what or even if she should say something to him but there seemed no way she could stay away from him.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." He said politely as he kept cutting fish without missing a beat.

"Did you kill anyone?"

He stopped. He looked up at her with one of his rare empty faces. "Why do you ask that?"

She wasn't sure. "I don't know I just wondered. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

He stared at her with that blank face, but she could see the conflict in his eyes. "Two," he said quietly and began cutting again. "I killed two enemies."

"How do you feel about that?"

He stopped working again. He looked at her but this time his expression was one of puzzlement "Feel? I don't feel anything about it."

"You killed two people and you don't feel anything?"

"That's right Yoshino. I feel a great deal when I go to the front. I feel pride in my shinobi skills and in the fact I am protecting my village. I feel fear and excitement every time I am on patrol and am about to go into a fight. I feel relief when it's over and my teammates and I are alive. I feel grief when I know one of my comrades is gone. I feel satisfaction when the mission is completed or the fight won. And I feel joy every single time I see the gates as my team and I come home. But when I'm killing, when I am ending the life of an enemy so he doesn't end mine or my friend's I feel nothing. I don't let myself feel anything because if I did I would start to think about it. And if I start to think about it, it will begin to eat me up. And if that happens I will hesitate to do what I must and if I hesitate I put not only my life but the lives of my friends in danger. And I would never do that, so I have taught myself to feel nothing." He stopped and the entire kitchen was silent. Every single person had stopped to listen to him. He picked up the kunai and began cutting fish.

"I'm sorry." Yoshino said quietly.

"Don't be sorry. Does this change how you see me?" She could only nod. "Makes you see me as a heartless killer huh?"

"No, just the opposite."

He wasn't sure what she meant by that but before he could ask she had headed out to the floor.

---

The next day she came into the kitchen already in uniform holding a bento box.

"What's this?" He asked suspiciously as she set it in front of him.

"Please consider it a peace offering. I know we can't make peace with Rock but I'd like to stop the fighting between us."

He looked at her. "Are you serious?"

She nodded. "I made you some beef stir fry with vegetables and rice."

"Thank you." He opened the bento and looked at the contents warily. "You didn't poison it did you?"

"No, I swear. At this point I really don't care who started what."

He nodded. "All right Yoshino if you'll stop I will too. Speaking of which could I have your pen?"

She was surprised by his request. She was even more surprised when he threw her pen into the trash. "Why are you..." From the trash can she heard a soft, 'boomf.'

"Very tiny explosive note. Not strong enough to break the skin but enough to send ink flying everywhere."

She looked at him admiringly. "You know you're very good at this."

"Shinobi," he said simply. "You know for someone who can't use chakra you're very good as well."

"Two older brothers," she replied. They both shared a laugh.

---

She was sitting at the bar when three guys came up to her. As always happened they began hitting on her. As always happened she let them know their attentions were not welcome.

"Come on baby have a drink with us." Idiot number one said.

"Thank you but I already have a drink."

"Well let us buy you another." Idiot number two said.

"No thank you I am not interested."

"Aw come on baby don't be like that." Idiot number one put his hand on her shoulder, only to have it slapped away.

"Don't touch me you drunk ass!"

"What's the problem?" Idiot number one asked.

"Maybe she's scared to be touched by a real man." Idiot number three put in.

Idiot number one leaned closer to her. "Aw is that the problem baby? You shy? Want a real man to show you some attention?"

He was about five seconds away from getting his nose broken when he suddenly stiffened. Moving faster than she'd have thought possible he flattened one of his friends with a punch and the other with a perfect kick to the head.

"What the hell I'm possessed!" The man shouted in terror, just before slamming his head into the bar and knocking himself out. Yoshino was on her feet looking down at three unconscious drunks.

"Normally I don't ever have to use shadow manipulation technique when I'm in Konoha. But it does come in handy some times." Shikaku came over to her.

She crossed her arms. "I would have dealt with them."

"I know I just didn't like seeing you being treated so disrespectfully."

She gawked at him. "You're joking. You don't like it when someone else does the exact thing you do?"

He looked at her in surprise. "I have never behaved that way."

She shook her head. "You never put your hands on me. I'll give you that. But the rest of it?"

He stared. "Was I really like *that* ?" She nodded. "I always thought I was being charming."

"You weren't." She said flatly. "You bothered me and no matter how many times I asked you to stop you wouldn't."

He looked down at the three men, and then back at her. He straightened up and then bowed to her. "Yoshino if my previous behavior was anything like that then I apologize to you. I sincerely regret if I seemed to be disrespecting you. Please believe that was never my intent."

She was genuinely surprised. In all her experience this was the very first time a man had offered her a real apology for the way he'd behaved. "Shikaku?"

"Yes?"

She gave him a little smile. "Buy a girl a drink?"

---

"Nice apartment." He said politely.

She looked around her place. "I know it's not much, but it's mine." She spoke with pride.

It had turned into a very surprising night. When he had sat down next to her at the bar they had talked and it had been pleasant. That happened more and more at work. Since calling a halt to their little war their conversations had actually grown friendly. While at the bar she had hinted she wouldn't mind being asked to dance. He however had told her flat out that he did not dance. So instead they had spent a couple hours sitting at the bar sipping on drinks and talking over loud music. When she had decided it was time to go he had walked her home. When they had gotten to her building she had surprised him again by asking if he would like to come up for tea.



And so, without even trying, he had found himself sitting at a small plastic table sipping a cup of tea. The apartment was tiny; it had a small bathroom, a kitchen connected to a living room, and a bedroom he had not been allowed to glimpse. It was sparsely filled and the furniture had clearly seen better days. But everything was in order and the place was immaculate. It was the opposite of his home which was large, spacious, filled with furniture and other items, and an absolute wreck. One look inside was enough to tell anyone that it was the home to a bachelor.

"I don't suppose you really understand. Being the head of a clan and all, but everything here was earned by me."

"No, I can understand pride." He sipped his tea. "But you know you still *could* have taken my money. You would have earned that too since you had my heart." He saw her grinning. "What?"

She chuckled. "I just like hearing you put it that way, when you say I have your heart."

"Well you do, and the first time I told you that you laughed at me."

"I thought it was just another one of your stupid pick up lines."

He looked at her seriously. "Why didn't you take my money? Was it really just so you could teach me a lesson?"

"Well that was part of it."

"What was the rest of it then?"

She took a hold of the silver onyx pendant and looked at it. "The truth is I just wanted it more than I wanted the money. I've never had any beautiful things and I don't own any expensive jewelry. This is the first really nice thing I have ever owned and I just wanted to keep it."

He sipped his tea. "Well if I had known that I suppose I could have had a new one commissioned and offered you that. Well, actually no I suppose I couldn't."

She gave him a curious look. "Why not? Wouldn't that have been cheaper?"

"Yes, but the problem wouldn't have been the cost. It would have been me giving you my heart."

She shook her head. "You are going to have to explain that one."

"Well you see there are a great many family traditions that I honor out of respect for my clan. One of them involves giving a heart to a woman. You see they can be given to children or male friends at leisure. But if I give it to a woman there is a special meaning. It means I give her my heart for always and that she is the only woman I will ever love or pursue." Yoshino stared at him. "Relax woman, I didn't give that to you I lost it on a bet. Besides what name is on it?"

"Yours."

He nodded. "When I give my heart to a woman I will have it commissioned and it will have her name on it."

"What happens if she doesn't want it?"

He laughed. "Then I'll thank her for letting me find someone who will. If she doesn't accept it then I am not bound."

She looked at him oddly. "It sounds like a special way to propose."

"Well not really. It's more a declaration of love and intention. My dad gave my mom one of course, but she still got an engagement and wedding ring later. He proposed a couple years after he asked her to accept his heart."

She looked more closely at the pendant. "Have you ever thought of giving one to someone?"

He shook his head. "I haven't found her yet and I am not sure I ever will."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Don't you believe in love?"

"In love yes, I love my friends, I love my village, but finding one woman I can love for the rest of my life? Who knows? Besides I don't plan to marry until I am at least 40, if I live that long."

"Forty?"

"I want to have gotten all adventuring and playing out of my system before I settle down and start having kids."

She laughed at him. "You make marriage sound like a prison sentence."

"Well I am not going to worry about it now. The way things are I don't know about reaching twenty two never mind forty."

"Baka! Don't say things like that." He shrugged. "What kind of woman do you want any way?"

He smiled. "I've recently decided she will have to be blonde or red head and she needs to be a soft compliant wife who will be happy to stay home and raise four or five children while I take care of the important decisions."

"Oh a trophy wife, how predictable. Don't you think a woman like that would bore you? Wouldn't you rather have a strong intelligent wife who will help you with making decisions and other burdens?"

"You mean someone like you?"

She laughed. "As if I'd put up with you! Besides, when and *if* I ever get married I am having one child, a girl."

He smiled at her. "What if you have a boy?"

"I will definitely have a girl and I am *not* going through child birth more than once."

They continued talking into the early morning until it was time for him to go.

---

It was the last night before he was to go to the front again. He had walked her from the restaurant to her building.

"Want to come up for tea?"

He hesitated but shook his head. "I'm sorry but I need to run home and shower and change so I can meet my friends."

She nodded sadly. "That's your tradition right?"

"Yeah, and the guys would kill me if I broke it. Listen your sister told me you turn twenty next month right?" She nodded; a bit surprised he knew or cared. He reached into his Chunin vest and took out a small cardboard box and a note in an envelope. "This is for you. It's a bit early, but happy birthday."

She looked at his offering and was deeply touched that he *cared* enough to think of her when he was about to go back to war. "Shikaku you didn't..."

He grinned and waved away her objection. "Hey I wanted to. Now don't open that until your birthday. Good night Yoshino."

"Shikaku," before he could leave she hurried up to him and kissed his cheek. "Come back safe."

He smiled at her. "I'll try, but I can't promise." With that he leapt away.

Five minutes later she was at her table and had opened both the gift and the note. In the box were a pair of gorgeous diamond stud

earrings. The note read:

*Yoshino, I want you to have something beautiful after you return my heart to me. And don't think about refusing my birthday gift or I will be deeply hurt and I know you don't want that. Best wishes, Shika  
P.S. I know you didn't wait until your birthday to open this. Shame on you!*

---

Konoha Hospital, one week before the expected return of Nara Shikaku.

She burst through the door to room 203. There he was, lying on a hospital bed, eyes closed with an IV stuck in his arm. She didn't hesitate, she didn't think. She ran over and threw herself on top of him. With tears flowing she pressed her mouth to his and kissed him desperately. His eyes opened immediately but all he could do was kiss her back. When she finally stopped she pulled her head back a few inches and stared into his bewildered expression.

"Shikaku don't die!" she wailed. Before he could say anything she was kissing him again. She was passionate and desperate and wanted him to know that she couldn't bear, couldn't take losing him.

When she pulled back for air he managed to gasp out, "Yoshino what..."

"Shikaku you can't die! Please I beg you don't die!"

"Woman who told you I was dying? I took some stab wounds but they've already been healed I'm being released tomorrow."

Immediately from the door there came a burst of laughter as Choza and Inoichi finally lost it. Yoshino stared at them. They had come into the restaurant telling her he was in critical condition and might not make it.

" **You bastards!** " She screamed at them. They both stopped laughing as they felt a murderous killer intent filling the room. Being veterans and not being completely stupid they knew when a tactical retreat was called for and ran.

When they were gone from sight Yoshino turned back to Shikaku, who she was still lying on top of. He was grinning at her. She reared back and punched him in the stomach as hard as she could.

"Ow!" He yelled out in real pain. "What the hell was that for woman? I didn't do anything!"

She jumped down off him and turned away as she rubbed her eyes. "Well they're your friends!" So far as she was concerned that was offence enough. When she turned back to him her eyes were dry and she looked furious. "It **never** happened! I didn't kiss you. I didn't say that I wanted you to live. I take it back I take it all back! Oh and here." She reached into a pocket of her bright yellow uniform and threw something at him.

He ducked but it hit him in the chest. When he looked he saw his silver onyx pendant lying on his bed. He looked at the still angry woman in surprise. "Don't I still I owe you about seven more weeks?"

But she shook her head. "So far as I'm concerned you've given me more than you owed me." Her eyes flattened. "But I swear if you tell *anyone* what just happened in here I will track you down and kill you myself." He nodded believing her. With that she stormed out of his room.

Thirty seconds later she stormed back in. "Yoshino what..."

She came over to his side took his head in her hands and swiftly kissed him. She kissed him as passionately and deeply as she had before. As soon as she had finished she turned around and began leaving again. "I'm glad you're all right. Next time you see me in the club ask me to dance."

"I don't know how." He said weakly.

She sent him a look of pure fury from the door and spoke one word with absolute authority and command. "Learn!"

---

A week later Shikaku came into the restaurant. He spotted her and grabbed her wrist and began leading her outside. "I need to talk to you."

"Hey! I'm in the middle of work!"

"What are you doing?" Her father asked him as he dragged his youngest daughter out the door.

"Sir please consider her to be taking a five minute smoke break."

"My daughter doesn't smoke."

"Good, it's a disgusting habit." He pulled her outside.

"All right what is this about?" She asked.

"I just wanted to give you this in private." From his vest he pulled out a Nara's Heart and held it out to her.

She looked at him in surprise. "After all that you're giving it back to me?"

He rolled his eyes. "Look at the name woman."

She did. In the central band it read, *Yoshino*. She looked at him in surprise. "Does this mean..."

He nodded to her smiling. "It means that I have fallen in love with you, you troublesome woman. If you accept this it means I swear to only love and pursue you for the rest of my days."

She felt the warm tears. "I love you too Shikaku and I accept with all my heart." She carefully took the pendant from him and put it around her neck.

He took her into his arms and smiled at his beautiful troublesome woman. "You know I always thought I would find a nice soft woman, but here I am hopelessly in love with one who can beat me up."

She put her arms around his neck and smiled up at him. "Want to know a secret?" He nodded. "Even the roughest woman is gentle with the man she loves."

They shared a long sweet kiss.

---

"They were married a year later and they lived happily ever after. Well not completely, but they're pretty happy I guess. Even though mom has dad totally whipped." Shikamaru brought the story to its end.

Temari was sitting up leaning forward with her chin in her hands. "Wow, I've got to say I never thought you had so much imagination."

"It happens to be the truth woman, every word of it."

"Your parents met in a bar?" He nodded. "She made him work in a restaurant cleaning fish?" He nodded again. "And it all happened because of a pendant?"

"That's right."

"You *really* expect me to believe all that?"

He reached beneath his shirt and pulled out a silver onyx pendant with three bands. On the central band she could easily read, *Shikamaru* . "Yes actually."



She reached out and touched his Nara's Heart and smiled. "Good story."